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AUTHOR Bassano, Dominique; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated how children report epistemic modality and focused on two main questions: (1) How do children reproduce modal devices that are present in the original (to-be-reported) discourse? and (2) How do children use different linguistic means of quotation--direct, indirect, or other--in this situation? Sixty monolingual French-speaking subjects, 4-8 years old, were presented with short films involving verbal interactions among four puppets (two animals, a boy, and a girl). In each scenario, a particular target action was performed by one of the animals. Shortly after, the boy uttered a statement that referred to this target action and accused one of the animals. Children were asked to narrate the films to someone who had not seen the films. When reporting statements, children used lexical substitutions. In their alternative answers, many of the children suspended the assertion in ways that completely transformed the sentence structure. Evidence suggested that younger children do not have the same means of expression as older students. With respect to the use of different types of quotations, the age of the subjects did not seem to account for the frequencies with which they used direct versus indirect quotations. (DJD)

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STATEMENT MODALITIES IN REPORTED SPEECH BY FRENCH CHILDREN

Dominique BASSANO,
CNRS, Laboratoire de Psychologie Expérimentale, Paris

Christian CHAMPAUD,
CNRS, Laboratoire de Psychologie Expérimentale, Paris

Maya HICKMANN,
Max Planck Institut fur Psycholinguistik, Nijmegen

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STATEMENT MODALITIES IN REPORTED SPEECH BY FRENCH CHILDREN

D. Bassano , C. Champaud & M. Hickmann

INTRODUCTION

Modality is an important aspect of the semantics of statements. According to most analyses, two components can be distinguished in a declarative statement: (1) the dictum, which corresponds to the propositional content, articulated through reference and predication, and (2) the modus, or modality, which indicates the speaker's attitude towards this content and which is expressed by a variety of linguistic devices across languages (e.g. verbs and locutions, adverbs, auxiliaries, moods, particles). Thus, the statements "Peter must come" and "Maybe Peter will come" have the same dictum but they differ with respect to the modus, expressed by means of the auxiliary "must", and of the adverb "maybe".

Among the different types of modality which can be expressed in language, epistemic modality, roughly, corresponds to the expression of belief, i.e. it enables speakers to take a position on the validity, truth, or factuality of propositions, and thereby to indicate the degree of certainty they associate with the event referred to in this proposition. From a developmental point of view, the acquisition of epistemic modality raises various questions. In particular, epistemic modality seems to appear quite late in comparison to other categories of modality with which it is often contrasted, such as "deontic" (obligation and permission), or "dynamic" (ability and volition) modality, at least in longitudinal studies concerning the acquisition of English (Stephany, 1986). It is therefore necessary to determine the factors that are likely to explain this delay and to examine thoroughly the developmental organization of the different modal components of this epistemic category. In previous studies bearing on the metalinguistic comprehension of epistemic markings, we assumed (Bassano, Champaud) that the development of these devices might be related to particular semantic and pragmatic properties characterizing their relationships with the assertion. The categories which confirm the assertion (particularly certain knowledge, expressed for instance by the

form "Je sais que"/ "I know that ") seem to be basic, while the categories which question the assertion (doubt, expressed in various degrees by opinion modalities such as "Je crois que"/ "I think that ", "Peut-être"/ "Maybe " differentiate only progressively and are mastered later (cf. Bassano 1982; Bassano & Champaud 1983; Champaud & Bassano 1984; Bassano 1985a; 1985b; Bassano 1986).

In the present study we examine how epistemic modalities are used in a particular type of discourse production: reported speech. Hickmann's previous developmental studies (1982, 1985, in press), focused on how children represent in narratives utterances that actually occurred in other speech situations, with particular attention to the cohesion of reported speech in discourse. Thus, among the different means available to speakers to report speech, one finds direct and indirect quotations. Direct quotations simply frame the reported speech and present it with all its features, deictics, mood, intonation, e.g. " He said 'The cat ate your crackers'". In contrast, indirect quotations involve the use of a framing verb with a complement structure and present all aspects of the utterance as propositional content, thereby requiring the adjustment of deictics, e.g. "He said that the cat had eaten the little girl's crackers".
Analyses of 4 to 10 year-old children's narratives show developmental progressions in the extent to which children frame reported speech with verba dicendi (whether with direct or indirect quotations, i.e., the youngest children often do not refer explicitly to speech events). In addition, they sometimes produce "mixed" quotations, i.e., when they do frame reported speech, they do not always adjust all deictics.

The present study focuses on how children report the epistemic modality and deals with two main questions:

-How do children reproduce modal devices that are present in the original (to-be-reported) discourse? We mainly focus here on the belief modality expressed by the form CROIRE in French, i.e. "I think/believe that + Prop" in contrast to simple assertions (Prop). Children's eventual transformations of such modal forms when reporting speech should inform us on the way they understand this modality.

-How do children use different linguistic means of quotation - direct, indirect or other -in this type of situation? The question is here to

determine the extent to which functional factors such as the type of modality or its conditions of use can induce one or another form of reported speech.

An experiment was designed in the form of a story-telling situation. Sixty monolingual French-speaking subjects, from 4 to 8 years of age, participated in the experiment. They were presented with short films, involving verbal interactions among 4 puppets: 2 animals (which varied from film to film) and 2 humans (always a boy and a girl). In each scenario, a particular action (hereafter "target action") was performed by one of the animals (for instance a cat knocked over a cup). Shortly after, the boy uttered a statement (hereafter the "target" statement) which referred to this action and accused one of the animals. This statement was uttered in response to a question ("what happened?") asked by the girl who was never present when the action had been performed. These scenarios varied in three main ways:

a) a first variation concerns non linguistic factors affecting the speaker's epistemic state, i.e. the speaker either witnessed the target action or he was absent when it took place;

b) a second variation concerns the form of the target statement which was either a simple assertion ("C'est le chat qui a renversé la tasse"/- "It's the cat who spilled the cup") or a believe-statement,i.e., an assertion modalized with the verb CROIRE ("Je crois que c'est le chat qui a renversé la tasse"/ "I think/believe it's the cat who spilled the cup");

c) a last variation concerns the truth/falsity of the target statement, i.e., particularly which animal was accused: the boy either accused the animal who had actually been responsible or the other animal, who was innocent.

Children were seen individually; they were asked to narrate the films to someone who had not seen them and to answer some systematic questions concerning the target statement.

The following analyses focus on two aspects of the data:

(1) Children's reports of the target statement during their narration of the films;

(2) Children's answer to one of the subsequent questions, which asked them what they would have said had they been the boy (hereafter "alternatives" to the target statements).

RESULTS

I. REPORTING THE TARGET STATEMENT IN NARRATION

The first analysis deals with children's report of the target statement during their narration. The two questions previously mentioned will be successively discussed: namely whether children reproducted the modal properties of the target statement and the characteristics of their quotations.

1. Reproduction of the target statement

As shown in Fig 1, in 20% of the cases the target statement does not appear in the child's narration. This result is not surprising, given the length and the complexity of the scenarios. The frequency of omissions is related to age: the rate of omission is 30% with 4/5-year-old subjects and then decreases to 17% at 6 and 8 years. However, omissions are not independent of the linguistic form of the statement: they do persist in 6- and 8-year-old children for simple assertions, while they decrease for modalized statements. This result could indicate that, at least from the age of 6 years on, the presence of an explicit modal device makes the target statement salient, thereby facilitating its recall. According to this interpretation, the 6-8 year-old children are therefore responding to the added meaning marked by the modality.

-Figure 1-

As shown in Fig 2, when the target statement is reported in the child's narration, the reproduction of the content (the dictum) is nearly always accurate. The subjects rarely make errors concerning which character had been accused in the target-statement, regardless of whether this accusation was true or false. Only 6% of the reported statements involve a modification of the dictum and these errors are distributed across all three age groups.

-Figure 2-

The modus is modified more frequently. These modifications are also equally distributed across the three age groups. However, a further

analysis shows that they seem to follow regular patterns that shed light on how children represent modalities.

First, the contrast between simple assertions and believe-assertions is clear-cut. When the target statement is a simple assertion, it is reported without any modification of the modus: the subjects restitute a simple assertion, e.g., "So, the man who had arrived at the beginning, he said to him 'It's the monkey'" (Ber., 6;6). In contrast, modifications occur with the restitution of believe-statements.

Second, as shown in Fig 3, even with believe-statements, modifications are not the most common rule: the main tendency is to be faithful (more than 60%), even though this tendency does increase with age, i.e., children often reproduce the modality with the same lexical form CROIRE, e.g., "And then, the man said to him 'I think/believe it's the frog'" (Mal., 6;4).

-Figure 3-

Apart from these faithful reproductions of the modal verb, two types of transformations can be observed:

- Omission: the modal device is simply omitted in the report and the statement is restituted in the form of a simple assertion (23% of the reports).

- Substitution: the statement is modalized, but with a different marking (17% of the reports). The most frequent substitution involves the adverb "peut-être ("maybe"), then the adverb "sûrement" ("certainly"); the impersonal form "ça doit être" ("it must be"), as well as "je pense" ("I think/believe"), are also found. With the exception of "je pense", these lexical substitutions all have in common the fact that they depersonalize the modality. In comparison to statements of the type "je crois" ("I think-/believe"), they seem to weaken the intensity of the conviction.

Both types of transformations of the modality are related to age: omissions occur more often with the younger children, and lexical substitutions are specific to the older children. However they also seem to be related to the conditions in which the modality is used, i.e., the speaker's epistemic state in the scenario. That is, omissions of the modality are more frequent when the speaker witnessed the event to which he refers in his statement. In contrast, substitutions are more frequent when

the speaker was absent during the event and, consequently, children tend to choose a formulation which weakened the modality in this case. These two transformations therefore indicate that in their report the children adjust the linguistic form of the statement as a function of the epistemic conditions, i.e., when the modal form "I believe that + prop." seems inappropriate, either because it is useless or because it is too strong.

2. Linguistic means of quotation

figure 4

At all ages, the target statement is most frequently reported by means of direct quotations (70%), framed by the verb "dire" ("say/tell") in almost all cases. Unframed quotations are scarce (3%), and only used by the younger subjects (4 and 6 years). Indirect quotations are much less frequent than direct ones: 20% of canonical indirect quotations are found, and some "mixed" quotations (10%), namely indirect quotations in which not all deictics are adjusted to the frame (e.g., "il avait dit que c'est le singe qui a renversé la tasse").

With respect to children's uses of indirect quotations, three points should be noted.

First, the use of indirect reports does not seem here to depend on the subjects' age. Such reports are as frequent in the 4-year-old group as in the 8-year-old group (25%). However, mixed quotations, which might show children's difficulties in shifting deictics with indirect quotations, are found almost exclusively among the younger children.

Second, with very few exceptions, the children do not use indirect quotations when they reproduce an explicit modal device. Only one 8-year-old subject formulates his report with a double embedding, i.e., "il dit qu'il croit que..." ("he says that he believes that ..."), and there are only three occurences of the verb CROIRE used as a framing verb, e.g., "And he believes it's the owl, but it was'nt" (San.,5;1).

Children's very rare use of indirect quotations when reporting modal devices could indicate that they view the two as functionally incompatible, rather than merely some difficulties resulting from the syntactic complexity of these constructions. That is, at all ages, they are sensitive to the fact that indirect reports modify the initial value of the modal device, when it is used in the first person by original speaker to mark his

subjective attitude towards the proposition. In this respect, in the three cases where the verb CROIRE is used to frame indirect quotations, resulting in a shift from "I think/believe" to "he thinks/believes", the verb looses its original modal value as an indicator of the speaker's commitment to the assertion and becomes a description of a mental attitude (from the narrator's point of view). It therefore tends to indicate that the assertion is wrong, as is the case with all 3 examples noted above, which were produced to report false target statements.

Finally, indirect reports are used much more frequently in the situations where the speaker of the target statement had not witnessed the event (48%) than in the ones where he had (17%) (at least when the statement is a simple assertion). This difference might indicate that indirect quotations tend to be preferred to report statements produced by speakers who are in a situation of uncertainty or doubt. More precisely, they are preferred to report utterances containing speakers' assumptions, as opposed to those which simply describe facts. Indeed, if the speaker has witnessed the event, his statement simply describes a fact, but if he has not witnessed it, the very same statement becomes a hypothesis he defends or an idea he puts forward. If this result is confirmed, it highlights one of the possible functions of indirect reports, namely as a linguistic means of indicating the "hypothetical" nature of the reported event.

II. PROVIDING AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE TARGET STATEMENT

Let us now examine the subjects' answers to a specific question which was asked by the adult after the narration, namely a question of the type: "Qu'est ce que tu aurais dit?" ("What would have you said?"). This question asked children to put themselves in the role of the quoted speaker and to provide an alternative to the target-utterance, allowing them to change it if they had found it to be inappropriate given the original context of utterance. Children's answers to this question (hereafter their "alternative answers") therefore correspond to <u>self-quotations</u>, i.e., they have to report their own speech which have a <u>fictitious character</u>, i.e., they have to imagine what they would have said, in the role of the target speaker, rather than what he <u>actually</u> said.

The analyses of children's alternative answers below first compare these answers with the original target- utterance, then examine the linguistic means of self-quotations used by the children.

1. Comparison between children's proposed alternative and the target utterance

In the analyses below, we first compare children's alternative-answers to the original target-utterance in the scenario with the following aims: (1) to determine wether they are equivalent or different and (2) if they are different, to determine the nature of this difference as a function of the experimental conditions. The criteria used to evaluate the extent to which children's proposed alternatives differ or not from the target utterance involve both the modus and the dictum. When children gave more than one answer to the alternative-question, only their first answer is included in the analysis.

Let us first examine the conditions in which the speaker of the target-utterance has witnessed the action. In these conditions, children's answers differ with respect to the modus, wether the assertion is simple or expressed by means of a believe-modality and with respect to the dictum, wether the animal which was accused was indeed the right one or the wrong one.

With respect to the modus the results are very clear-cut in these conditions and need not to be presented extensively. It is sufficient to say that, when the assertion is simple, the children answer the alternative question by producing an utterance which is almost always equivalent to the target utterance (i.e., simple assertions). In contrast, when the target-utterance contains a believe-modality, the modus is almost always different because the children have a strong tendency to omit the believe-modality. This result indicates that subjects consider this modality as inappropriate given the conditions of utterance, i.e., when the speaker has witnessed the event, and that a simple assertion would be more appropriate.

With respect to the dictum, the results are also very clear-cut and not surprising in these conditions. Children's alternative-answers consist of utterances that are equivalent to the target-utterance when the right animal is accused and that differ from it when the wrong one is accused

(i.e., children's alternatives consist of true accusations).

There are few exceptions to these tendencies across all age groups and no evidence for developmental progressions in these conditions.

Let us now examine the conditions in which the speaker of the target-utterance has not witnessed the action. In these conditions, the effect of the variables considered above (i.e., the form of the assertion, the truth value of the proposition) are not clear-cut at all, but the results show strong developmental progressions.

It should be first noted that three related types of answers appear in these conditions:

- some subjects answer that they would have asked somebody before accusing any animal. We will call this type of answer an inquiry.

- some subjects refuse to make a decision and answer "J'aurais rien dit" (I would have said nothing) or "J'aurais dit que je ne sais pas" (I would have said that I don't know). We will call this type of answer a confession of ignorance.

- some subjects leave open the choice of the accused animal in various types of answers, e.g., "J'aurais dit que c'est le chat ou le chien" ("I would have said that it was the cat or the dog"). We will call this type of answer a suspension of choice.

These three types of answers all correspond to a refusal on the part of the subjects to take any responsibility in assertions concerning events that they have not witnessed (or more precisely, events that they would not have witnessed, if they had been the speaker). They appear only in the oldest groups (6 and 8 years) and their frequency increases with age.

Figure 5 shows the results of the analysis which compares children's proposed alternatives with the target utterances. Since the variables that had an effect in the witness-conditions had no effect here, we present global results for the modus and the dictum.

-- Figure 5 --

With respect to the dictum, transformations which consist of changing the accused animal are the rule for the youngest subjects. Such tranformations gradually decrease with increasing age and they are replaced by responses of the type inquiry, confession of ignorance, and suspension

of choice, whereby the children explicitly refuse to make an assertion, given the epistemic state of the speaker whose role they are playing. This tendency is of course characteristic of the cases where the wrong animal was accused in the target utterance. (Note, however, that the small number of answers at 4 years in the cases where the right animal was accused does not allow us to make a direct comparison between the two situations; see note 2).

With respect to the modus, there is hardly any difference between the proposed alternatives and the target-utterance in the youngest group, whereas they differ increasingly with age from 6 years on. This trend goes in par with the increasing frequency of responses whereby children explicitly refuse to produce assertions. (Note, however, that the small number of answers at 4 years in the believe-condition prevents us from making generalizations about this group; see note 2). In addition, a few answers in the oldest age group consist of replacing the modal verb "je crois" by other expressions, such as "je pense" ("I think") or "ça doit être" ("it must be").

These results indicate a developmental progression in children's ability to take into account the conditions in which speakers make assertions about events and the consequences of these conditions for their epistemic state, particularly in situations where speakers have not witnessed the events and are therefore not in a position to make simple assertions.

2. Linguistic means of self-quotation

Figure 6 shows the distribution of the different linguistic means used by the children to produce self-quotations in their alternative answers. These linguistic means fall into three main types: direct and indirect quotations of the form "I would have said (that) p", as well as answers in which the object of the verb say does not have the form of an explicit complement clause (hereafter "synthetic responses"), i.e., anaphoric answers ("I would have said the same") and answers which contained another speech act ("I would have said nothing", etc).

-Figure 6-

We observe that the great majority of the answers to the alternative

question consisted of indirect quotations at all ages. This result is in sharp contrast to the above-mentioned result concerning children's reports of the target-utterance during the narration, which rarely consisted of indirect quotations.

It should also be noted that children's alternative answers contain a somewhat lower frequency of the framing verb "to say", even though this verb is present in the adult question. In particular, a few subjects use "demander" (to ask). In some cases, "to say" seems to be used as an equivalent to "to ask" ("J'aurais dit "Qui a fait ça?", "J'aurais dit qui l'a fait" with the meaning of "to ask"). In addition, only the oldest subjects use a majority (10/17) of "correct" verbal inflections in the subordinate clause when the framing verb is in the past ("J'aurais dit que c'était") (I would have said that it was). Among the youngest children (4 years) the more frequent form is "J'aurais dit que ce serait", (I would have said that it would be), i.e., these children produce a redundant conditional in the quotation, probably to mark its fictitious character.

As for the "synthetic" responses, the anaphoric ones seem to be characteristic of the 6 year-old children ("I would have said the same"), whereas cases where the subjects mention another speech act, e.g. "J'aurais dit la vérité" "I would have said the truth"), "J'aurais rien dit" ("I would have said nothing"), appear especially in the oldest group (8 years).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we propose a few remarks concerning the two sets of results presented above: children's reports of the target-statement and their so-called "alternative-answers".

The situations in which these two types of productions were obtained are clearly different: in the former case, the subjects are only asked to recall the target-statement and they tend to reproduce the statement without many modifications. In the latter case they are explicitly asked to modify the statement according to their judgement and it is therefore not surprising to find a higher frequency of modifications.

Nevertheless, it is possible to synthetize these results with respect to two points: (1) children's representations of the believe-modality and (2) their use of different linguistic means of report.

With respect to children's representations of the believe-modality, we have noticed a tendency not to report exactly the believe-verb in the first task (simple report). As for the second task ("alternative"-answer), the spontaneous production of this modal verb is negligible. These results indicate that children perceive the conditions of use of this modal form in a restrictive manner. When the speaker has witnessed the event, children view the believe modality as inappropriate, since in the two tasks, they prefer a simple assertion. Surprisingly, they also seem to perceive this form as inappropriate when the speaker has not witnessed the event. When reporting the statement, they use lexical susbstitutions, e.g., replacing CROIRE ("think/believe") by peut-être ("maybe"). In their alternative answers they suspend the assertion in various ways, thereby completely transforming the sentence structure.

These last two transformations, however, occur only in the oldest age groups. This result indicates that the youngest children do not have at their disposal the same means of expression as the oldest ones and that they probably lack the mobility necessary to process these different situations. Finally, some evidence seems to show that the youngest children do not treat the situation where the speaker has not witnessed the action directly in the same way as the oldest ones do. They do not seem to grasp the specificity of such a situation, particularly its consequences for what can be inferred about the speaker's state of knowledge.

With respect to children's uses of different types of quotation, the age of the subjects does not seem to account for the frequencies with which they use direct vs indirect quotations, at least in the age span considered here. However, our experiment emphasizes the importance of some functional factors, among which are the following:

- indirect quotations seem to be incompatible with the expression of modality, at least with the first-person "believe-modality" considered here ("je crois");

- indirect quotations are frequently used to report an utterance about an action when the speaker has not witnessed this action. Hence, indirect quotations can be regarded as a linguistic device which marks the hypothetical nature of the reported statement;

- indirect quotations are clearly the most frequent devices used in the alternative answers. The fictitious character of the speech to be reported seems to play a determining role. This last result is in agreement with the previous one about hypotheticality. Both results suggest that indirect quotations may be preferred to direct ones to express the fictitious or hypothetical nature of the reported utterance.

Footnotes

1. The verbs CROIRE and PENSER can both be translated in principle by either "to think" or "to believe", although their uses are not completely interchangeable (CROIRE being closer to "believe" and PENSER closer to "think").

2. Some children did not answer the alternative-question, either because they did not know how (e.g., "I don't know") or because the adult did not ask this particular question when it was necessary to shorten the interview (particularly with the youngest children, given the problems of attention-span that are typical at this age).
In addition, among the children who did answer this question, some produced more than one answer, either because they spontaneously changed their mind or because the question was followed by more probing during the course of the interview.

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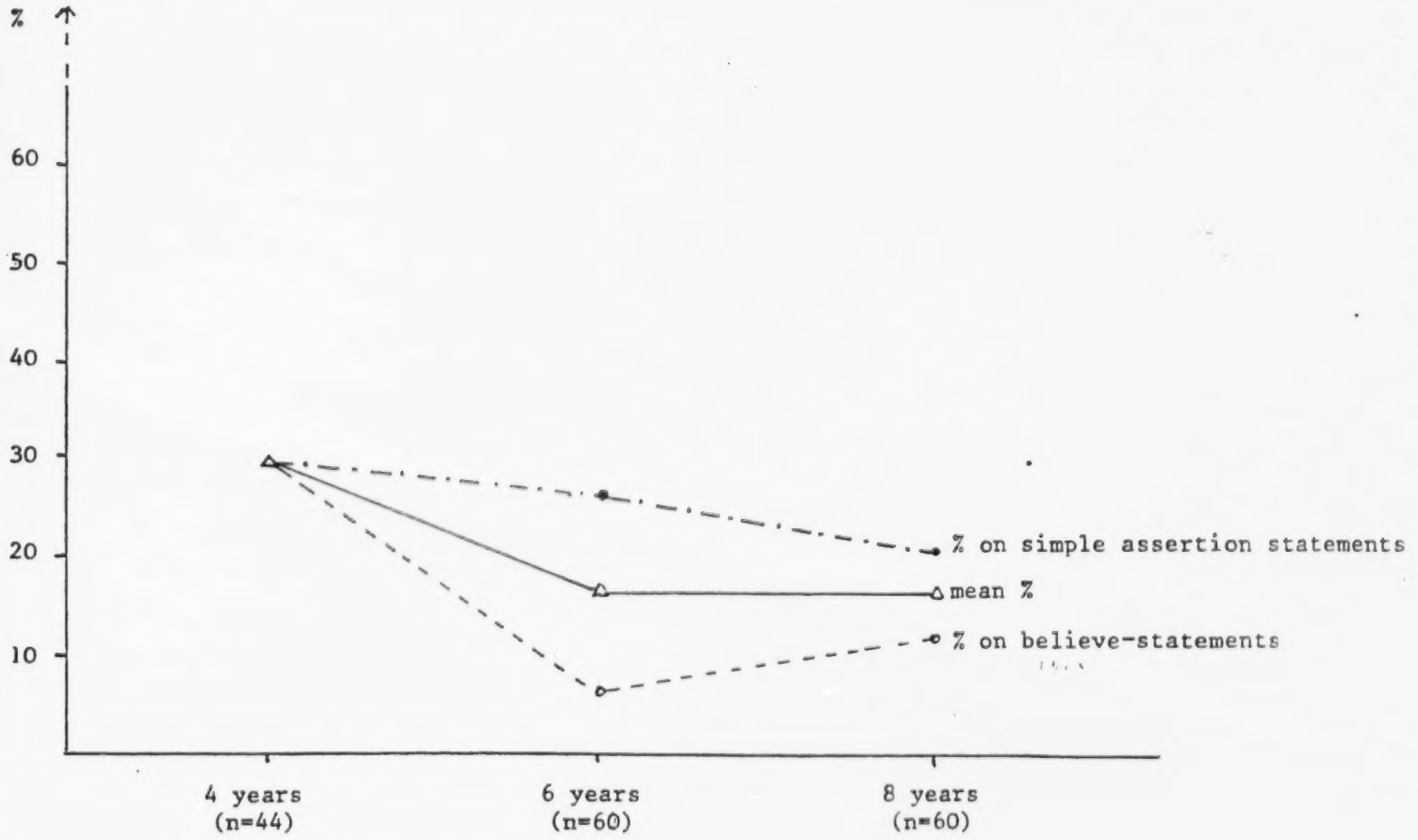


Figure 1 Omissions of the target statement in the narration

mean %
% on simple assertion statements
% on believe-statements

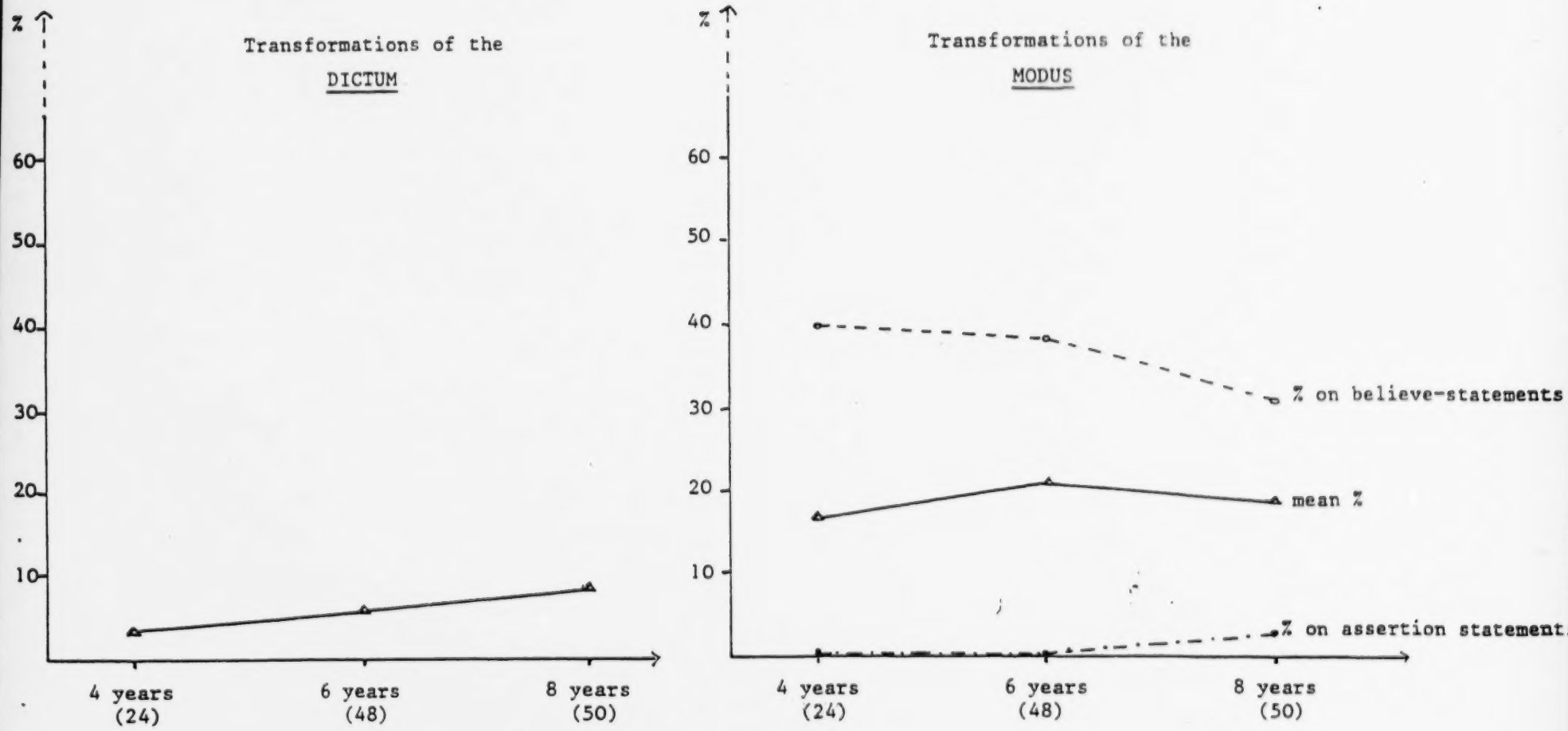


Figure 2 Transformations of the target statement in the narration

mean %
% on assertion statements
% on believe-statements

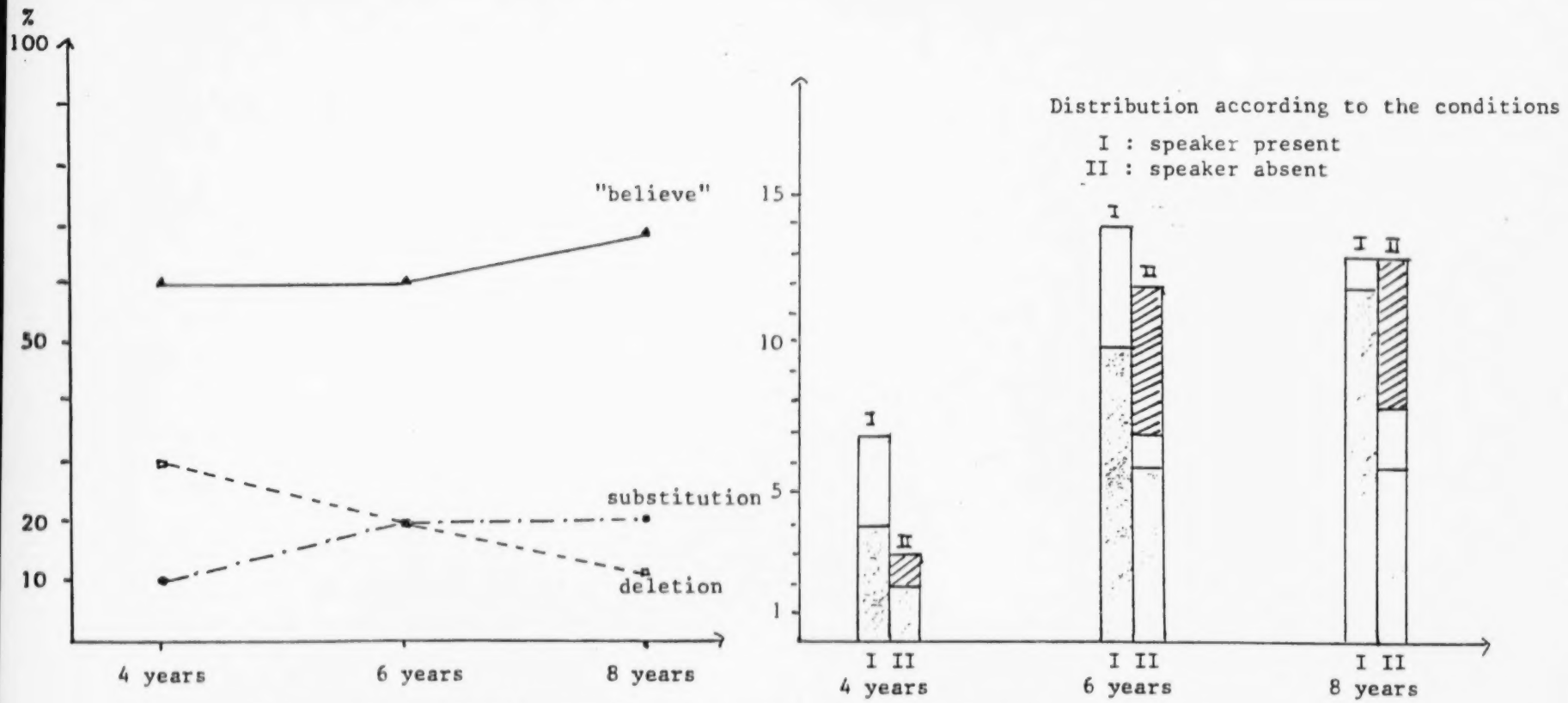
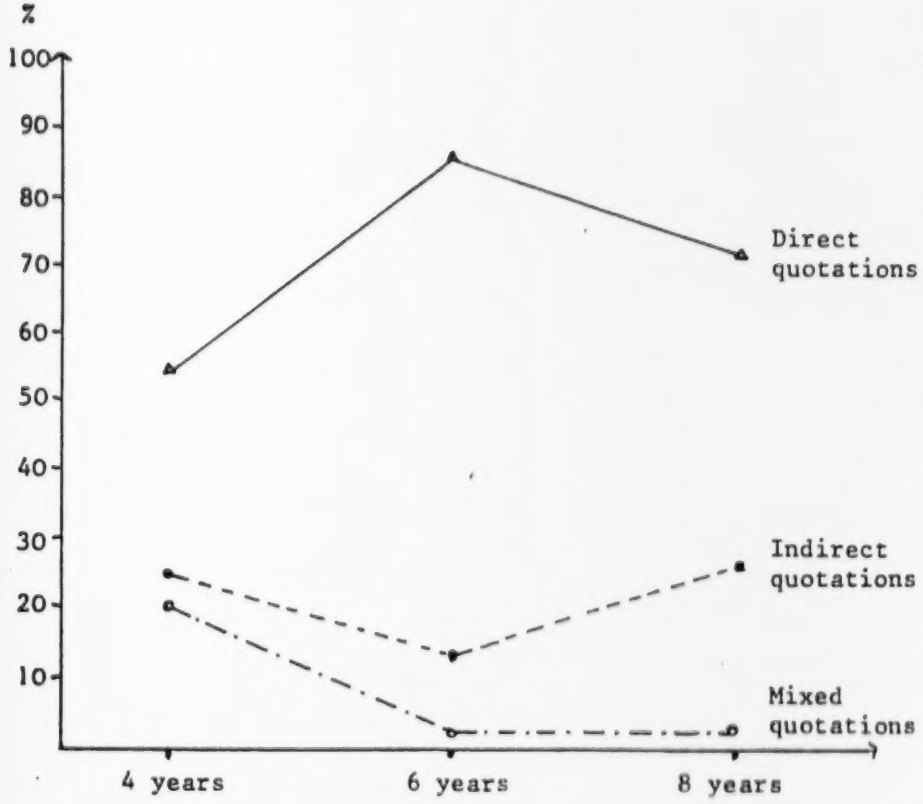


Figure 3 Report of the believe-statement : procedures of the modus reproduction

faithful reproduction (with the verb "believe")
deletion of the modality
reproduction with a lexical substitution of the modality



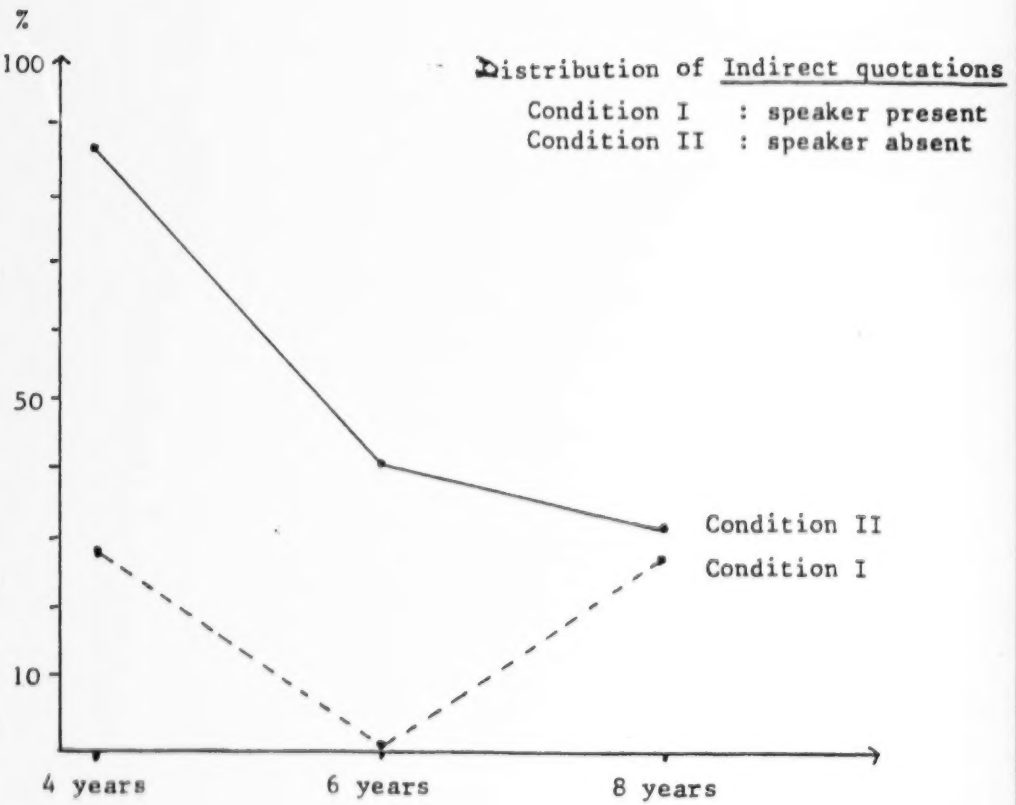


Figure 4 Report of the target statement : types of quotations

Figure 5 : "Alternative answers" : differences with the target-utterance
(Conditions where the speaker has not witnessed the action)

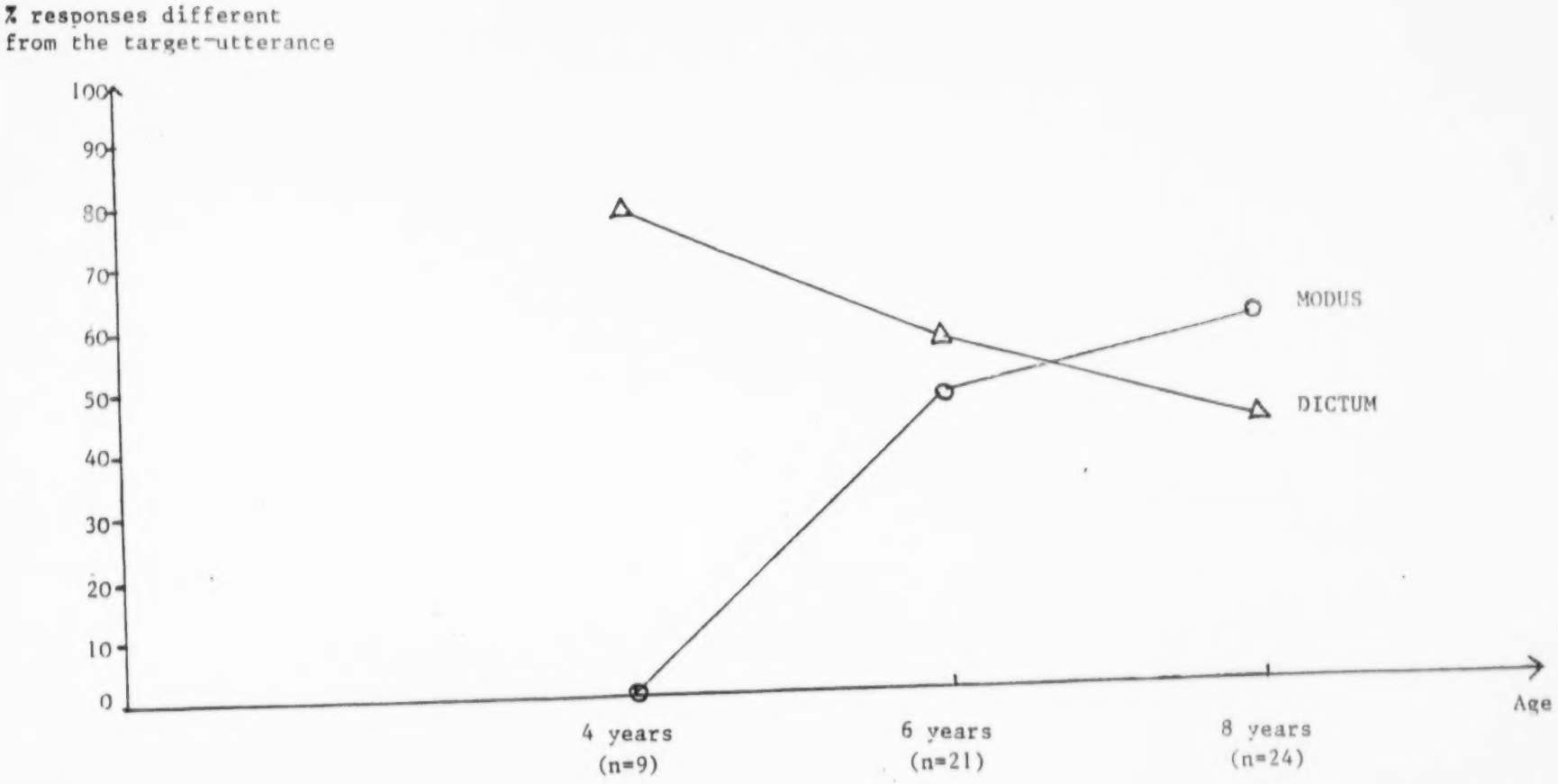


Figure 6 : "Alternative" answer : First responses
(All conditions pooled together)